



Case Study

Online Youth Club - Medway Youth Service

Digital Youth Work and Cyber Resilience Research May 2023



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Medway Youth Services

Medway Youth Service's Online Youth Club aims to engage with young people by providing different digital spaces where they can chat and take part in activities. Youth workers are able to see what content participants are viewing or creating, and discuss cyber resilience issues with them as they arise.

Online Youth Club

Medway Youth Service's Online Youth Club offers weekly evening sessions to young people through SpatialChat. Participants are typically age ten and eleven, though older young people, up to nineteen, or twenty-five with SEND, can also take part. Via the platform, Medway provides a virtual space with multiple digital rooms, such as a recreation room and a gaming room, where different conversations can take place. Participants move avatars representing themselves to their preferred location, hearing more of what is taking place in a room the closer they are. Young people can join in through video conferencing and a chat function, and are able to share content and take part in activities.

SpatialChat was selected following a high level of consultation with young people, after a number of other platforms were trialed when the Online Youth Club was first set up during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Young people like the customizable elements of the site. They can request new rooms (there is now a cat room to share cat memes), ask for changes to how the space looks and create their own avatars. Having multiple rooms is also beneficial. Young people can move rooms if they aren't interested in an activity or conversation, and it avoids the conversations feeling like lectures, as can happen in large, single-room video calls where it is difficult for everyone to participate. Young people also like the chat feature, which allows them to express themselves using digital language, including memes. The Online Youth Club allows chats to happen live in sessions, avoiding the backwards and forwards rhythm of some messenger chats.



There are a number of benefits to the project. The club was initially set up to engage with young people during lockdowns. Despite some young people experiencing digital fatigue, socializing online became normalized during the pandemic and is now something a number of young people are still interested in. The club still plays an important role in connecting young people who may feel isolated from living in or moving to geographic locations that are far from friends, or who may be unable to attend face-to-face youth clubs due to issues at home. Because the Online Youth Club reaches across Medway, it operates on a scale where it can offer activities around niche interests. This is difficult in face-to-face sessions, as there may only be one or two young people who want some activities in each local youth club. The Online Youth Club also allows young people to approach youth services themselves; some might have been reluctant to interact with youth workers if they had approached them instead, for example, through schools. Medway has found that the online club provides a pathway for young people into the non-digital youth services.

Digital Resilience

Digital resilience is discussed by Medway's youth worker, with concerns that "cyber" is a term lost on both young and older people. Likewise, "digital" is broader, encompassing any device that connects and digitizes an aspect of people's lives. The Online Youth Club does not treat young people as "digital natives". Whilst young people can be quick to work new technology, they will not necessarily understand the full consequences of their using it; they need support to consider the implications of their digital actions. Likewise, young people are likely to come up against issues online, such as inappropriate or challenging content, which could leave them in situations where they have no idea how to react, feeling trapped and scared. Given young people are going to access online content unsupervised, young people need support to expect that problems will arise and to know options for dealing with issues.





The Online Youth Club offers a number of opportunities for youth workers to talk to young people about digital resilience. Digital issues arise in the club's online setting and youth workers can jump in to discuss these. Being in a shared digital space at the same time means youth workers can talk to young people about their online actions whilst they are doing them. For example, youth workers can see content young people share, and watch items with them in the virtual rooms. This means everyone can discuss content in real time, rather than youth workers hearing about it second-hand as would be likely to happen in a face-to-face setting. Likewise, youth workers can look at issues that arise in how young people handle chats in real time, rather than hearing about it as a past event. Designing avatars can naturally lead to discussions about how young people present themselves digitally. The platform also lets young people message youth workers privately if they want to discuss particular problems one-to-one, though this is used alongside other digital methods such as texting.



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Some activities that take place in Online Youth Club provide opportunities for young people to frame issues as problems facing characters rather than themselves. For example, a young person may feel more comfortable talking about an issue their Dungeons and Dragons character has rather than identifying the problem as their own.

Youth workers can take an approach of discussing with young people how an online issue would be treated in the face-to-face world, and what equivalent online reactions could be. For example, they can discuss how a problem in the playground might be reported at school, and what methods for reporting online incidents could be.

Youth workers may be in a strong place to talk about these issues as they can be open with young people if they do not know an answer. They can work with young people to look at an issue together, in a way that does not judge young people's choices.

Learning and Challenges

In Medway, youth workers have seen some challenges around promoting digital resilience, and around online youth work in general. Medway Youth Services have found that young people are unlikely to be explicit about their digital resilience support needs, not wanting to challenge assumptions from peers and older generations about their high levels of knowledge in this area. However, the informal discussion approach taken by the Online Youth Club, where young people can bring up and explore issues, means pre-existing knowledge does not need to be openly discussed. Likewise, whilst young people don't come to the club to specifically learn about cyber resilience, they do bring other specific concerns to youth workers about that can lead to relevant discussions. Finally, whilst not a service Medway Youth Services currently offer, youth workers think it would be beneficial to provide digital information young people can peruse when youth workers are not there on a platform such as Discord.

One issue faced by Medway youth workers is the speed at which young people move on to new technology, and the time it can take for youth services to adapt to it. Medway emphasized that talking to young people about the platforms they use can help keep services current, and has the added benefit of leading to digital resilience conversations with young people if they aren't sure how to use sites or have encountered someone or something on it that makes them uncomfortable. The Online Youth Club youth worker found that youth workers can also learn about new platforms from young people, and can at the same time provide challenge as necessary. Another issue for public sector bodies such as Medway Youth Services, is the time it can take to get organisational approval for projects. Technology can have moved on again by the time youth workers can create a service using platforms that were previously on-trend. This means it can be difficult for youth workers to reach young people in the spaces they prefer, and can make it harder to build rapport and relationships.



By providing its Online Youth Club, Medway Youth Services is able to give young people spaces to chat and take part in activities, no matter where in the local authority area they are located, and lets youth workers provide sessions around niche interests. At the same time, the youth club provides a platform where youth workers can engage with young people around digital resilience through informal discussions as issues arise.



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